

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-31 (canceled)

5 Claim 32 (currently amended): A loading system for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter such that said strand is frictionally engaged by both of said first and second loading conveyors to pull said strand into said gap and such that said strand is conveyed from said upstream entrance end to said downstream exit end by an indexed drive and discharged at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, wherein said first and second loading conveyors comprise respective
10 first and second upstream rotary drive pulleys each driven by a motor, wherein the same said motor drives both of said first and second drive pulleys, wherein said motor drives said first and second pulleys at the same rotational speed and in opposite rotational directions, wherein said first drive pulley comprises a first driven gear on a first shaft rotational about a first axis, said second drive pulley comprises a second driven gear on a second shaft rotational about a second axis, and ~~comprising a motor having~~ wherein said motor has an
15 output drive shaft rotating about a third axis and having a drive gear on said drive shaft engaging at least one of said first and second driven gears, and wherein said drive gear comprises a worm gear extending between and engaging each of said first and second driven gears on distally opposite sides of said worm gear.

Claim 33 (canceled)

Claim 34 (currently amended): A loading system for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap
5 having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter such that said strand is frictionally engaged by both of said first and second loading conveyors to pull said strand into said gap and such that said strand is conveyed from said upstream entrance end to said downstream exit end by an indexed drive and discharged at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, wherein said first and second loading conveyors comprise respective
10 first and second upstream rotary drive pulleys each driven by a motor, wherein the same said motor drives both of said first and second drive pulleys, wherein said motor drives said first and second pulleys at the same rotational speed and in opposite rotational directions, wherein said first drive pulley comprises a first driven gear on a first shaft rotational about a first axis, said second drive pulley comprises a second driven gear on a second shaft
15 rotational about a second axis, and ~~comprising a motor having~~ wherein said motor has an output drive shaft rotating about a third axis and having a drive gear on said drive shaft engaging at least one of said first and second driven gears, wherein said first and second axes extend parallel to each other and transversely to said forward travel direction, and said third axis extends transversely to said first and second axes, and wherein said third axis
20 extends obliquely relative to said forward travel direction.

Claim 35 (currently amended): A loading system for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap
5 having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter such that said strand is frictionally engaged by both of said first and second loading conveyors to pull said strand into said gap and such that said strand is conveyed from said upstream entrance end to said

downstream exit end by an indexed drive and discharged at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, wherein said first and second loading conveyors comprise respective
10 first and second upstream rotary drive pulleys each driven by a motor, wherein the same said motor drives both of said first and second drive pulleys, wherein said motor drives said first and second pulleys at the same rotational speed and in opposite rotational directions, wherein said first drive pulley comprises a first driven gear on a first shaft rotational about a first axis, said second drive pulley comprises a second driven gear on a second shaft
15 rotational about a second axis, and ~~comprising a motor having~~ wherein said motor has an output drive shaft rotating about a third axis and having a drive gear on said drive shaft engaging at least one of said first and second driven gears, and wherein said first and second axes are spaced along a projection line extending transversely therebetween, and wherein said third axis intersects said projection line.

Claim 36 (presently presented): The loading system according to claim 35 wherein said third axis transversely intersects said projection line.

Claim 37 (previously presented): The loading system according to claim 36 wherein said third axis transversely intersects said projection line at a point between said first and second driven gears.

Claims 38-39 (canceled)

Claim 40 (currently amended): A loading system for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap
5 having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter such that said strand is frictionally engaged by both of said first and second loading conveyors to pull said strand into said gap and such that said strand is conveyed from said upstream entrance end to said

downstream exit end by an indexed drive and discharged at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, ~~wherein~~ wherein said first and second loading conveyors comprise respective
10 first and second upstream rotary drive pulleys each driven by a motor, wherein the same said motor drives both of said first and second drive pulleys, wherein said motor drives said first and second pulleys at the same rotational speed and in opposite rotational directions, wherein said first drive pulley comprises a first driven gear on a first shaft rotational about a first axis, said second drive pulley comprises a second driven gear on a second shaft
15 rotational about a second axis, ~~and comprising a motor having~~ wherein said motor has an output drive shaft rotating about a third axis and having a drive gear on said drive shaft engaging at least one of said first and second driven gears, wherein said first and second axes extend parallel to each other and transversely to said forward travel direction and are spaced along a projection line extending transversely therebetween and obliquely relative to
20 said forward travel direction, wherein said third axis extends obliquely relative to said forward travel direction, and wherein said projection line extends obliquely upwardly and rearwardly, and said third axis extends obliquely upwardly and forwardly.

Claim 41 (original): The loading system according to claim 40 wherein said projection line and said third axis intersect each other.

Claim 42 (original): The loading system according to claim 40 wherein said projection line and said third axis are transverse to each other.

Claims 43-47 (canceled)

Claim 48 (previously presented): A loading system for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap
5 having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter such that said strand is

frictionally engaged by both of said first and second loading conveyors to pull said strand into said gap and such that said strand is conveyed from said upstream entrance end to said downstream exit end by an indexed drive and discharged at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, wherein said second loading conveyor extends along said forward travel
10 direction from an upstream end to a downstream end, wherein said first and second loading conveyors comprise respective first and second conveyor belts, and comprising a roller cam engaging one of said belts at a location between said upstream and downstream ends, said roller cam being adjustably movable toward and away from the other of said belts to control said dimension of said gap, wherein said second conveyor belt has a bottom side facing
15 downwardly and engaging said strand of said food product, and has a top side facing upwardly, and wherein said roller cam engages said top side of said second conveyor belt above said gap, wherein said first and second loading conveyors comprise respective first and second upstream rotary pulleys, said second pulley being spaced rearwardly and upwardly from said first pulley, and wherein said roller cam is forward of said second
20 pulley, and wherein said roller cam is vertically aligned with said first pulley to locate said gap at said first pulley and forward of said second pulley.

Claims 49-68 (canceled).

Claim 69 (previously presented): A method for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising providing a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, providing a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a
5 gap having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter, frictionally engaging said strand with both of said first and second loading conveyors and pulling said strand into said gap and conveying said strand from said upstream entrance end to said downstream exit end by an indexed drive, and discharging said strand at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, and comprising providing an entrance guide spaced upstream of said
10 gap, and guiding said strand into said gap through said entrance guide, and comprising

providing said entrance guide as an idle roller spaced rearwardly and downwardly of said upstream end of said first loading conveyor, and feeding said strand upwardly to said idle roller and then upwardly and forwardly to said upstream end of said first loading conveyor.

Claim 70 (previously presented): A method for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising providing a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, providing a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter, frictionally engaging said strand with both of said first and second loading conveyors and pulling said strand into said gap and conveying said strand from said upstream entrance end to said downstream exit end by an indexed drive, and discharging said strand at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, and comprising providing an entrance guide spaced upstream of said gap, and guiding said strand into said gap through said entrance guide, and comprising providing said entrance guide accessible to an operator at an operator loading station, providing said first and second loading conveyors with first and second rotary conveyor pulleys, providing a faceplate blocking access to said rotary conveyor pulleys from said operator loading station, providing said entrance guide as an inlet through said faceplate, and feeding said strand through said inlet through said faceplate and into said gap.

Claim 71 (previously presented): A method for loading an elongated strand of food product of a given diameter on a transport conveyor, comprising providing a first loading conveyor extending along a forward travel direction from an upstream entrance end to a downstream exit end, providing a second loading conveyor spaced above said first loading conveyor by a gap having a dimension less than or equal to said given diameter, frictionally engaging said strand with both of said first and second loading conveyors and pulling said strand into said gap and conveying said strand from said upstream entrance end to said downstream exit end by an indexed drive, and discharging said strand at said downstream exit end to said transport conveyor, and comprising providing an entrance guide spaced upstream of said

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- 10 gap, and guiding said strand into said gap through said entrance guide, and comprising
providing said entrance guide with a combination of an inlet cone spaced rearwardly of said
upstream end of said loading conveyor and an idle roller spaced rearwardly and downwardly
of said inlet cone, and feeding said strand upwardly to said idle roller and then upwardly and
forwardly to said inlet cone and then forwardly to said upstream end of said loading
15 conveyor.

Claims 72-77 (canceled)